

VZCZCXYZ0000  
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHZP #0605/01 2071458  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
R 251458Z JUL 08  
FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2314  
INFO RHMFISS/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC  
RHMFISS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 000605

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/21/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PM](#)  
SUBJECT: PANAMA: 2009 NATIONAL ELECTION YOUTH DEMOGRAPHIC

REF: PANAMA 00580

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY POLCOUNS BRIAN R. NARANJO REASON:  
1.4 (d)

-----  
SUMMARY  
-----

¶1. (SBU) Of the 2.2 million Panamanians eligible to vote in the May 3, 2009 general elections, 53% will be voters between the ages of 18 and 40. The youth account for one third to one half of political parties memberships. Efforts to reach out to these new voters included multi-tiered organizations designed to mobilize this important voting bloc on election day. POL met with national youth secretaries of the contending political parties: Cambio Democratic, Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD), and the Panamenista Party to discuss youth presence in the upcoming presidential elections. In addition to informal meetings, POL also attended youth-related campaign events and engaged in dialogue with youth activists to understand: who represented the youth demographic; what they wanted from the presidential candidates; why they have engaged in the elections, and how they intended to impact Panama's political landscape.

-----  
Growing Presence Among the Parties  
-----

¶2. (SBU) According to Panama's Tribunal Electoral (TE), 2.2 million citizens will be eligible to vote in the May 3, 2009 general elections. Of that figure, 53% of Panamanian voters are between the ages of 18 and 40. As the youth vote would comprise over half of the electorate in 2009, youth membership has also been a significant component within Panama's political parties. Democratic Change's (CD) youth secretary Christina Maria Gonzalez noted that youth supporters represented 35% of the party's membership. Likewise, 30% of governing Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) membership was between the ages of 18 and 30. The opposition's largest political party, Panamenista Party, doubled the number of registered voters in the youth demographic from 50,000 to 110,000 between June 2007 to June 2008, accounting for 50% of party membership asserted Panamenista Youth Secretary and legislative candidate Aldofo "Beby" Valderrama.

¶3. (SBU) Presidential candidates have reached out aggressively to this important youth demographic. The parties have established multi-level systems to organize youth outreach at the national, provincial, and local level. For example, Valderrama described the Panamenista youth network as a four-tiered pyramid of youth secretaries, delegates, leaders, and volunteers. The national youth secretary and the youth executive board (comprised of 15 members) streamlined

the party's political platform and outreach initiatives to youth delegates that were assigned to manage outreach in Panama's nine provinces. The youth delegates administered campaign activities at the provincial level and supervised a team of youth leaders (3 to 4 persons) in each voting district. These leaders managed close to 150 volunteers that were spread out in neighborhoods located in each district. Heavily populated voting districts that historically determined election results, noted Valderrama, such as 8-8, 8-9, and 8-10 would have a larger number of volunteers to mobilize the youth vote. The April 2008 Tribunal Electoral's report stated that within the 8-8, 8-9, and 8-10 precincts, 1 in 3 Panamanian voters are between the ages of 18 and 35. Valderrama noted that because of this significant statistic, the Panamenista party directed approximately 700 youth volunteers across these three districts.

-----  
Social Background of the Youth  
-----

14. (SBU) The youth demographic among the competing political parties represented a diverse mix of social classes. PRD youth supporters were primarily working class Panamanians that attended the University of Panama, affirmed PRD youth secretary Samuel Buitrago. Conversely, the CD was comprised of young professionals from the middle and upper class. The Panamenista party held the most diverse mix of young supporters and extended across social, economic, and educational status. Buitrago noted that PRD's university outreach focused on establishing a relationship with the youth attending the University of Panama. In contrast, Valderrama highlighted that the Panamenista youth campaign connected with student organizations in both public and private universities.

-----  
Platform Identical Among Social Class  
-----

15. (SBU) Despite the various backgrounds of youth activists within the contending parties, the issues important to the Panamanian youth were identical. Education reform and job security were mentioned consistently as their top concerns, during POL's discussion with youth leaders and supporters from all parties. University students and young professionals were dissatisfied with Panama's poor quality of education. Most felt inadequately prepared for job opportunities presented by foreign investors. Poor education heightened Panama's economic challenges such as the growing income gap and stagnant social mobility among the poor and working class, asserted PRD youth supporter Fernando Paniagua. To combat this problem, youth leaders constructed their own political platform and urged presidential candidates to address these issues. Youth activists in the PRD and Panamenista party requested a "Congress of the Youth" that would operate as a separate entity within each party and ensure a voice for young voters.

-----  
Internet is Key to Youth Outreach  
-----

16. (U) "The use of on-line technology is tied to the fact that 65,000 new young voters will participate in the 2009 presidential elections," La Prensa journalist Manuel Vega Loo wrote on June 1, 2008. Candidates have used social networking sites Facebook, MySpace, Flickr, and Youtube to: mobilize youth supporters, publicize their platforms, recruit campaign volunteers, and increase party membership. From June to July, competing political parties have increased registration to their respective Facebook webpage from 5,000 to 7,000 subscribers.

17. (C) "Internet marketing is a science. You have to pay for it to win," PRD youth secretary Buitrago told POL on July 16. Presidential candidate Balbina Herrera's campaign hired a team of computer experts to manage and operate her online

campaign, Buitrago stated. These contractors were focused solely on promoting Herrera's campaign events, political platform, and recruiting volunteers through e-mail, online chat, Herrera's webpage, social networking sites, and mobile text messaging. Buitrago asserted that hiring a team of experts accounted for Herrera's efficient online communications whereas her challenger Juan Carlos Navarro used campaign volunteers to manage his online network. When discussing internet strategies with the competing political parties, CD and the Panamenista party confirmed that their online campaign was also managed by volunteers within the party. Herrera's distinctive approach to hire online campaign coordinators produced an effective internet strategy. The Herrera campaign responded to POL's online membership requested in 24 hours and has submitted daily e-mails that publicize her campaign events and highlight her political platform, allowing her to promptly frame the debate on issues important to the Panamanian youth.

-----  
The Obama Effect  
-----

18. (C) Across all political parties, youth leaders noted that Barack Obama's popularity with American voters under 30 accounted for his win in the Democratic primary elections. As such, youth secretaries in Panama's political parties implemented Obama's campaign strategy to encourage youth engagement at the grass roots level. Buitrago and Valderrama stated that their parties closely monitored outreach strategies and implemented these tactics into their campaign.

19. (C) Buitrago noted that a New York Times article which outlined Obama's effective use of Facebook, Myspace, and YouTube, was the stimulus for Herrera's decision to hire online campaign coordinators instead of recruiting non-experienced campaign volunteers. Likewise, Valderrama mentioned that a Public Diplomacy "Democratic Leadership" International Visitor Program (IVLP) in the U.S. provided him the opportunity to catch a glimpse of Obama's campaign which courted the youth vote and decided a political platform that encouraged youth participation would be more effective than conventional tactics used to attract young voters such as concerts and rallies.

10 (U). Valderrama's effort paid off. He organized the "Youth for Varela" campaign event that attracted 3,500 supporters for presidential candidate Juan Carlos Varela. Varela defeated his challenger Alberto Vallarino in a landslide victory of 56% to 34% in the Panamenista primary elections. Following the July 6 primary elections, La Prensa reporter Ereira Prietto-Barreiro wrote that Varela's aggressive outreach to young voters was an important factor in his victory against Vallarino. In the same news article, Hatuey Castro, a Vallarino supporter, confirmed Barreiro's observation and stated, "Varela talked to the youth. The Panamenista party has a lot of young people and Varela captivated them with his platform."

-----  
COMMENT  
-----

11. (C) This is the second report in a series of cables that track Panama's national elections. The Panamanian youth are getting the attention that they deserve. Political parties realized that the youth demographic have an enormous impact on the primaries and could determine the general election. However, the youth movement continues to face the challenge of maintaining a cohesive organization and ensuring their voice will be heard by presidential candidates. Youth leaders will have to mobilize and attract more young voters to emphasize the power of their vote on election day. POL will continue to follow youth presence and its impact on upcoming elections.

MESA